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ABSTRACT

Although professional educators and public school decision makers have attempted to respond to increased educational demands and a broader spectrum of students, the education of rural youth is a neglected area both in higher education and in educational legislation. The record indicates that policy decisions and the resulting legislation have favored non-rural areas. Higher education has not responded to the needs of rural residents. Stronger research programs are needed to assess the needs of rural educators, to determine how those needs can be met, and to develop and disseminate improved educational strategies for rural schools. Rural teachers must be trained to adapt to students who may have different values, areas of commitment, and understanding of life. Because North Carolina is predominantly rural, two of its universities provide assistance with rural educational problems. Auburn University has outlined a proposed plan for assistance to rural schools. East Carolina University has long provided instructional services to the rural districts of eastern North Carolina, and hopes to focus instruction for educational personnel specifically on rural schools. Currently, overwhelming support exists for establishment of a Rural Education Institute to develop research strategies focused on concerns in rural education and disseminate findings important to rural educators. (CM)

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RURAL EDUCATION: A FIELD OF STUDY WHOSE TIME HAS COME IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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[1981]

Professional education is under attack at all levels. There has been no other time in history when public confidence in education was at a lower ebb. Part of the blame for this situation is a direct result of conflicting societal views of education. Schools in this country have always been viewed as the pathway to success. They have guaranteed perpetuation of social values, historical recognition, scientific progress, and preparation for adulthood. As Hoppe (1978) states, "The American view of schools is that they must be stalwart and stable, committed to the highest ideals, teach all the basics and a great deal more to learners of all ages, attempt to correct all the social ills, and do it all at a modest cost." (p. 2).

Early education objectives remained unchanged for decades following the development of the New England Plan of 1642 establishing the first guidelines for public schools. In 1776, when only 15% of the people in this country were literate, the objective of going to school was simply to learn how to read and write. During the late 1800's, providing job skills for the farm, industry and home became the primary goal of education. Since that time, changes in our society have garnished the public expectation of classroom instruction. The Morrill and the Smith-Lever Acts led to the creation of a different and broader concept in regard to the function of education (Kimbrough and Nunnery, 1976). The schools were now looked

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to as agencies for social change. The demand for new services from public schools has continued to increase. The "great depression of the 1930's" and the resulting social legislation placed even more pressure on public schools. It was during this period, in particular, that schools began to be viewed as vehicles through which all social ills and all inequities could be ameliorated. In 1954, civil rights legislation was passed to end racial discrimination and in the 1960's, schools were suddenly told to strengthen instructional areas of science, mathematics, foreign language, and vocational education. Through the National Defense Education Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), funds were provided for increased guidance services, economically deprived children, increased media services, supplemental regional centers, and educational laboratories. Much of this legislation sought to equalize funds to the rural South and inner-city schools having high concentrations of the poor. Today, schools are expected to remove sex stereotyping, biases due to national origin, provide bilingual education, drug, sex, and alcohol education, and equal opportunities for all regardless of social, physical, or mental status.

As the demands on public schools and school teachers increased, the school population also changed. In the early years, most students stayed only until they could read and write. Today, all students are expected to know much more and stay much longer. The high school student and preschool child examine their family role needs, community structure, and are involved in career guidance activities. Public schools and postsecondary institutions are catering to the nontraditional student, the re-entry youth, the displaced homemaker, the veteran and the retired worked who has returned to school for the high school diploma or new job

skills. We have moved from a "cells and bells" type of institution to home based learning, individualized studies and a learning to learn environment (Dickson, 1977). Today the expectation is that everyone should complete a minimum of twelve years of school and the growth of the community college and technical school's system is having the impact of raising expectations to fourteen years with renewed emphasis on pre-school learning as well. This trend continues despite the fact that there is little evidence about the relationship between the amount of knowledge required to be a success in many occupations and level of education completed.

Despite this lack of evidence, professional educators, and more importantly, public school decision makers, have attempted to respond to both the increased demands and the broader spectrum of students. Educators have tried a variety of approaches in teaching math, reading, science, languages, values, etc. Most of these new methods were developed and implemented in the schools through the use of federal dollars. While these dollars were well received and are well intended, we believe that many of these funds have created as many problems as they were intended to solve.

This process is exemplified by our efforts to improve our science and math programs right after Sputnik was launched. That push of the late 1950's and 60's produced the new math, chemistry, and physics--most of which have been discarded. That same effort also produced thousands of high school counselors who were to start guidance programs in schools. The problem was that no one knew exactly what these counselors were to do with the students in these programs. Colleges were getting funds to

provide the training programs; individuals were getting paid to go back to school; and, public schools were getting money to hire the counselors. While no one knew exactly what they were doing or why--everyone was happy.

Another characteristic of these development efforts is that most have been created as discrete programs to be added to existing programs. Federal guidelines for the use of the money generally forced a situation where little thought was given to how the programs might be integrated into the existing structure. It is not surprising that many of these programs disappeared when the federal dollars went away.

Even more perplexing was the lack of involvement of professional educators, particularly classroom teachers, in the planning of these programs. Unfortunately for them, it is the classroom teachers who must implement these programs and they are being assigned more and more to do in shorter and shorter spans of time. Time on task studies of the last few years have revealed that an alarmingly small percentage of a student's time in school is spent on tasks related to learning reading, writing, and arithmetic. "These factors, as well as others, have brought our educational system to the brink of a new decade in a state of disarray" (Warner, 1980, p. 5), and are magnified in educational institutions located in rural areas.

The special problems of Rural America, particularly as it relates to the education of rural youth, is largely a neglected area in the field of higher education. Cosby (1979) observed that society in general has tended to both ignore and devalue the needs of rural people. Rural America has been described as an entirely different culture about which we know very little. We are eager to share its apparent virtues while ignoring its needs.

When we do pay attention, we treat it like we treat less developed countries--as if they know nothing about their own needs (Robertson and Robertson, 1978).

The tendency of many educational decision makers is to think the plight of Rural Americans as a small problem, but as Tamblyn (1971) reports, one-third of the United States population live in non-urban areas. Sher (1978) has stated that 32% of the United States children are enrolled in schools in rural/non-metropolitan areas. Certainly the trend over the last fifty years is for the country to become more urbanized but most sociologist's and futurist's believe that the percentage of rural population will remain relatively constant for the forseeable future. Nevertheless, rural education continues to be largely ignored. A careful review of federal and state spending patterns and research and development activities will demonstrate that the prime area of interest for legislators and educational policy makers has been on the problems of urban and suburban school districts. Erwin (1979) reported that 3/4 of all the school districts in the United States were located in non-metro areas. Yet, Muse and Stonebacher (1979) report that during this thirty-year period non-metropolitan schools have received five percent of the research monies, eleven percent of materials and media dollars, thirteen percent of the vocational education funds and thirteen percent of the monies to improve programs to reduce the drop-out rate. Historically, urban and suburban interests have dominated educational policy at the national level but recognition of the need for federal rural education policy is growing (Adams, et al., 1977). A study conducted by Brown (1980) examined four programs representing formula competitive, and formula matching federal

flow through funds coming to rural schools in North Carolina. She reported that in terms of actual dollar amounts, rural schools in North Carolina were receiving equal funding with urban areas. She points out, however, that the amount of dollars does not necessarily mean equality in programs. Many programs such as vocational education and services for the handicapped have a much higher cost factor in rural areas.

For example, Federal Law 94-142 and its companion state law requires that all individuals have equal access to free public education regardless of handicap. There is no question that the law places a severe financial burden on urban and suburban districts, but the impact in rural areas goes beyond severe. It can become catastrophic. The question in such districts becomes a matter of being able to respond to the requirements of the law in any reasonable fashion. Even more important than cost factors, however, is an understanding of the process through which policy decisions are made. It is these decisions which lead to legislation that produces the specific programs. We believe that the record indicates that such policy decisions and resulting legislation clearly favor non-rural areas.

As the federal and state governments have become more involved in the educational process there has been a natural shift in location of policy decision making. Local communities and local boards find themselves spending more time trying to figure out how to respond to federal and state mandates than they do in making policy decisions based on the local situation. The real policy decisions are not made at the local level; they are now made at the federal and state level. It should be no surprise that these decisions reflect an urban-metropolitan bias. The more education policy is made as a result of government action, the more we can

expect it to reflect urban concerns. National and state legislations are put together on an equal representation basis which means by definition that two-thirds of the members represent urban-metropolitan areas. Two-thirds always out-votes one-third and that is the process of legislation and more often than not, educational policy development. In the long run, it makes no difference that the amount of dollars per child or student is equal. If the money is designed to solve urban not rural problems, all the rural school may have received is money it didn't really want for that particular need. Because much of that money is catagorical and designed for a specific purpose, it can not be used for anything else. This is the plight of rural education. It is a major reason that on almost any index, rural schools and rural children are ranked worse than their metropolitan counterparts. Their achievement test scores are lower; they start school later; they complete fewer years of school; and have lower participation rates at post-secondary institutions (Fratoe, 1978).

Like federal and state governments, higher education has not responded to the needs of Rural America. Teacher training institutions have also been the victims of the lure of federal dollars tied to meeting urban needs. They continue to produce teachers and other school specialists who are far better prepared to work in more populated areas than sparsely populated communities. Perhaps even worse, these institutions are not forcing their research and development efforts on the problems of rural education. Even universities located in rural areas are neglecting this important area of research. It is highly recommended that stronger research programs be developed in order to adequately understand the needs of rural educators, to determine how these needs can be met, and equally

important, to coordinate the dissemination and diffusion in development of strategies which would bring about proper change for the improvement of Rural America (Adams, et al., 1977). Federal monies for the support of such efforts should follow this direction. It has been said that rural communities have problems which are as diverse as the differences between rural and urban, but research activities need to be encouraged by dollars from the state and federal level.

These steps are necessary to insure that when test programs or research on rural education problems are funded through federal or state grants, the programs are not short-lived. Institutional practices have often returned to their traditional programs with little effect on pre-service training within the educational training institutions. With the funds gone, innovative designs and emphasis melt back into the traditional program structure. Professional educators and teaching institutions must begin to recognize the need to prepare teachers for the less than adequately supplied classroom, the student reared in a less than cosmopolitan environment, and the central office support staff which serve in more than a single capacity. Graduating educators must be prepared with not only basic cognitive skills and demonstrating competence but also the ability to adapt to a student in a school environment who may have different values, areas of commitment, and different understanding of the basics of life.

What is needed is the: (1) periodic studies of the status of rural education, (2) analytical synthesis of what is working best with the rural classroom and school district, (3) development of teaching skills that work, (4) analysis of school staff characteristics of rural "master

teachers", (5) a better understanding of the community dynamics in school relations, and (6) comparisons of student aspirations and attitude (Parks and Sher, 1979).

Educators at Auburn University, have outlined a proposed plan for assistance to rural schools. These include rural research integration, development of special preservice and inservice training competencies for rural schools, development of an exchange of information, study and attention to special education needs, development of financial strategies, and a closer examination of transportation, energy, and technological needs. This is one institution's attempt to relieve the rural educator's plight.

Institutions of higher education must be made aware that we may be producing "rural illiterates" who have no real understanding of the problems facing rural education. Analysis of present reserach findings for rural education indicate that there are various perceptions of what is rural and what is not rural. These findings also clearly document the phenomena of rural neglect. These attempts at information integration do not meet rural school personnel's criteria for assistance. It is absurd for rural educators to attend conferences looking for answers to their dilemma and find the entire meeting describing urban models for program projections. One major university made the mistake of referring a rural education inquiry from the School of Education to the School of Agriculture not recognizing the value of this area of concern. Another agency, public or private, will most certainly be developed to try to meet the rural education needs. Cooperative extension services were developed when new knowledge and the system of information transfer was not adequately provided through local or higher education institutions. We are not

teaching our teachers or our teachers' teachers (higher education faculty) how to adequately prepare for rural environments, despite the rural nature of our state.

The 1970 Census reported 55% of the North Carolina population as rural. Only six North Carolina cities are classified as metropolitan by the United States Census Bureau (having a population over 100,000). Dr. Lee Grier (1980), Director of the Division of Human Equity with the State Department of Public Instruction (Raleigh, N.C.), identified twenty-one school systems in the state as non-rural. His identification was made using such factors as population zone and impact, community benefits, and school management techniques. The elimination of those data elements from the 1980 Statistical Report of North Carolina Public Schools indicate that there are 864,090 students in rural systems with an educational staff of 62,687. These figures reflect that 74.8% of North Carolina students and 73.8% of the educational personnel are located within rural systems.

The eastern region of North Carolina is largely composed of these rural school districts. The School of Education at East Carolina University is the major institution of higher education in this area which has a long tradition of providing instructional services to the districts of Eastern North Carolina. The School has also developed an excellent working relationship with the Regional Centers of the State Department of Public Instruction in our service areas. Thus, there is already a strong relationship between the School of Education and the school districts of this region, and the State Department of Public Instruction. At a recent meeting held by the School of Education for Superintendents of local education agencies and State Department of Public Instruction personnel in this

region, preliminary discussions were held about the problems of rural Eastern North Carolina. There was overwhelming support for the notion of the establishment of a Rural Education Institute for the dual purpose of developing research strategies focused on concerns in rural education and the dissemination of findings important to the rural educator.

While there has been an excellent working relationship and while the University has provided training to many of the teachers and administrators in the Eastern North Carolina region, the School of Education has not engaged, with the help of these same school districts and the State Department of Public Instruction, in any focused research and program development activities in relation to the problems of rural education. The major purpose for the establishment of a Rural Education Institute would be to bring all interested groups together to focus on the problems of rural education and to try to develop realistic programs designed to solve those problems. The Institute, from its inception, would attempt to utilize resources already in place either at the School of Education, in the public schools, or at the Regional Centers and the State Department of Public Instruction. A major outcome of such an effort would be the development of rural education policy with implications for rural areas across the state and nation.

It is also anticipated that such a consortium will provide a vehicle through which federal, state, and foundation funds will be solicited for research and development activities.

It is our intention that the instruction for the educational personnel at East Carolina University be focused specifically on rural schools. No other teacher preparation program can claim this inclusiveness of rural

data within their regular program. We believe that both higher education and state certification agencies need and can be more responsive to the needs of rural schools. Currently, dual certification in many instances means an additional two years in course studies and internships. A teacher certified in one area forces specialization at a time when rural schools need good generalists. If higher education does not provide LEA's with the personnel, skills, talents, basics, they will continue to muddle through the national impositions forsaken by universities who could have offered assistance. They will continue to call on the competitive private agencies to provide competent consultants when they can afford it and they will ignore the University as a "tomb" of philosophical/rhetoric which does not bother to collaborate or relate with the very agencies which provide positions and a staff needing inservice or recertification. Now is the time when institutions of higher education must recognize rural education as a field of study whose time has come.

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